

AT TOP, CAREER IS NEARING BITTER END

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Body

Even the highest-ranking full-time black officer in the Michigan National Guard feels like he's an outsider.

Lt. Col. Lawrence Millben, support commander at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, likens himself to the main character in the novel "The Spook Who Sat by the Door."

The novel is a story of a black man hired by a company solely to show outsiders that it supports affirmative action and racial equality.

Millben says the Guard showcases his career to cover up inequality. He has been doing the job of a colonel since 1990 and is bitter about being denied a promotion because he doesn't have a four-year college degree.

"There are no minorities in the good old boys club," said Millben, the first black person to enlist in the Michigan Air Guard.

The glass ceiling for blacks is real in the Michigan National Guard, and progress is agonizingly slow, senior-ranking black officers say.

"Whites tend to mentor whites and blacks tend to mentor blacks," said Air Guard Brig. Gen. William Henderson. "We don't have enough blacks at the top. . . . They're not there to mentor."

Millben is the only full-time black officer in the top ranks; at 58, he is nearing retirement. The other senior-ranking black officers are part-time.

Several other states have black officers at the top of the chain of full-time commanders, according to Jack Broderick, director of equal opportunity for the National Guard Bureau.

The adjutant general of the Ohio National Guard is black, as are the assistant generals in Texas, New York, New Jersey, Tennessee, Wyoming and other states.

Maj. Gen. Gordon Stump, who directs the Michigan National Guard, said he has made progress since taking over in 1991. He has appointed Henderson, the first black brigadier general, another black general whose promotion will take effect this year, and four black battalion commanders.

Erin Einhorn

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Still, the Guard is not doing enough to promote black officers, said retired Sgt. Maj. William Stigler, chairman of a watchdog committee of retired minority Guard members. All of Stump's appointments have been for part-time positions.

According to the Guard's roster, about 20 black officers with college degrees are eligible for promotions into the highest ranks. But black officers are not elevated to command positions or sent to military schools, like their white counterparts, in preparation for higher ranks, Stigler said.

Stump said downsizing -- the Guard has lost about 2,200 positions in the past five years -- leaves fewer openings for promotions.

"At this point there is not a solution until individuals retire," said Col. Larry Ware, 54, a quality engineer who will become the Army Guard's first black general in September when another general retires. "He can't fire everybody and start again."

Ware said that promoting black officers to top positions will take time because, during the 1980s, the Guard pushed out four blacks who were in the upper ranks and did not promote others through middle ranks.

Stump said a college education provides a stumbling block to promoting more black officers -- such as Millben -- to the highest ranks. Most of the top officers have college degrees, he said.

Capt. William Mitchell, who served as a military lawyer at Selfridge for nine years, said the decision on Millben was "racial and political."

Millben has attended military schools more than 50 times and is pursuing a college degree. He is an inventor and an investigator of military aircraft crashes. He said Guard officials told him he would be promoted to colonel after finishing the Air War College, which he did in 1993.

Jason Gamlin, director of the state housing authority, said he quit his post as a captain because Millben wasn't promoted.

"If Millben was anyone else, he would have two stars on his shoulder," said Gamlin, referring to a general's rank. "It's an ugly story. The understanding was that he would be made a colonel."

"If it doesn't happen for Millben, it's not going to happen for anyone."

Notes

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Graphic

Photo CRAIG PORTER;

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Larry Ware

Lt. Col. Lawrence Millben greets an old friend in an area of

the Selfridge base where F16 jets are repaired. He has been

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performing the duties of a full colonel since 1990, but hasn't received the promotion. More photos of the Guard's highest-ranking full-time black officer, Page 10F.

Maj. Gen. Gordon Stump has appointed the Guard's first two part-time black generals and all four black Army battalion commanders.

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